

CHAPTER ONE

The “Art” of the “Ancient Near East”

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Introduction

By general agreement, *ancient Near East* designates the region extending from modern Turkey to Afghanistan, from the Black Sea to Yemen and Oman. Sometimes it includes Egypt, and it may thus correspond approximately to the current term *Middle East*. But precisely what it encompasses, how it functions as a rubric governing description and analysis, and where its antiquity begins and ends, are matters of some debate. How did this area come to comprise a distinct and independent cultural sphere in the modern scholarly imagination? Are we justified in continuing to treat its material record as a meaningful unit, and if so, why and how? In short, what is our purview?

And when we speak of the “art” of the ancient Near East, do we use a label or concept consistent with prevalent or persistent notions in its constituent cultures, or do we impose an anachronistic (and thus inappropriate) modern construct? In this chapter I distinguish two aspects of this issue, because they entail different sets of questions and have been approached by different groups of specialists. The first involves the critical reception of Near Eastern antiquities in the West, especially following the nineteenth-century rediscovery of Mesopotamian antiquity. The objects initially recovered from archaeological explorations were incorporated into existing aesthetic frameworks established primarily for histories of ancient Greek art, and evaluated accordingly.

They gained importance not only as material remains of biblical civilizations, but also for their perceived role as predecessors of Greek art. The second set of questions concerns whether, or to what degree, the modern Western concept of *art* is applicable to the ancient Near Eastern context. Does the term introduce an artificial or misleading view of ancient practices regarding image, representation, and process, suggesting an autonomous aesthetic sphere comparable to modern notions of “fine art”?

The complex reception history of Near Eastern antiquity involved national rivalries, contested sites of cultural and social authority, and unique institutional circumstances (Bohrer 2003). As sculptures, inscriptions, metalwork, and other finds began to enter western European museums, debates turned primarily on the historical significance of these objects and their aesthetic value as deemed by comparison with Greek art. If there is a general (if implicit and ambivalent) consensus today on what constitutes “ancient Near Eastern art,” it is arguably due largely to modern responses to these artifacts initially generated by Western museums. Display practices, treatments in handbooks, and the circulation of photographs and casts of selected monuments, for example, privileged a relatively small group of objects (chiefly sculptures) as highlights of biblical civilizations and the predecessors of Greek art.

How the field defines or identifies itself, what it considers its core corpus and mission, and the kinds of questions it generates, are crucial; in turn, they determine which publications or professional groups serve to disseminate its research, and where the subject is housed in universities and museums. In recent decades, specialists in the ancient Near East have found new publication venues for their work outside field-specific periodicals, in journals such as the *Art Bulletin* and *Art History*. The ancient Near East, or at least Mesopotamia, is emerging alongside Egypt, Greece, and Rome as an independent field of ancient art, to judge from its representation in prestigious lecture series devoted to the history of art, globally conceived: the Slade Professorship of Fine Art at the universities of Cambridge (Irene Winter in 1996) and Oxford (Zainab Bahrani in 2010–11); and the Andrew W. Mellon Lectures, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (Irene Winter in 2005).

Defining the “Ancient Near East”

The most commonly used designation for ancient southwest Asia reflects early modern labels for the regions east of Europe, beginning with the Ottoman Empire—the “nearest” East (or Orient)—along with their Eurocentric perspective. In 1916, the Egyptologist and archaeologist James Henry Breasted coined the term “Fertile Crescent” to emphasize the critical

zone in southwest Asia that, together with the Nile Valley, was the cradle of Western civilization. That same era invented the *Middle East* to serve evolving Western geopolitical interests in the western lands of the Ottoman Empire (Scheffler 2003). The field of scholarship devoted to investigating its ancient material and written remains, developed in the nineteenth century, has largely retained the label that dominated its formative phase.

The *ancient Near East* is often defined as a geographical region whose precise borders fluctuated over time, expanding to embrace Egypt, Central Asia, or Arabia depending on historical period. But the subject its historians actually investigate is “the Sumero-Akkadian culture and its network of interactions with neighboring cultures,” observes Guy Bunnens (2006: 267); “it is only a matter of convenience if we refer to its development as ‘ancient Near Eastern history’ because, contrary to what this phrase suggests, geography is not the main defining factor.” Does this focus also extend to the material record revealed through archaeological investigations? Written and illustrated accounts documenting the ruins at Persepolis and other pre-Islamic sites in western Iran circulated in Europe long before the explorations in northern Mesopotamia that unearthed Assyrian palaces and associated sculptures (Sancisi-Weerdenburg and Drijvers 1991). But is what we now call “ancient Near Eastern art”—like “ancient Near Eastern history”—actually Mesopotamian culture and its network of interactions (as with Porada 1995)?

Henri Frankfort’s influential survey *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, first published in 1954, explicitly defined the ancient Near East as the geographical region extending from modern Turkey and the eastern Mediterranean coast to Iran (Frankfort [1954] 1996). But its constituent parts were not equal, in his view; originality and artistic maturity required the political stability found only in the two distinct centers of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Frankfort’s survey and interpretation assumed a Mesopotamian core surrounded by politically unstable “peripheral regions”—Syria, Asia Minor (Anatolia), and Persia (Iran)—whose accomplishments in the visual arts never matched their acknowledged literary achievements. This alleged lack of originality was especially true of Syria and Anatolia; “Persia alone among the peripheral regions possessed an individual style” (Frankfort [1954] 1996: 333). Another authoritative survey published in the following decade, Anton Moortgat’s *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia* (1969), while confined to the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, presented a similar view of the “peripheral regions”—albeit without explicitly referring to Frankfort’s book. Mesopotamian art, as Moortgat’s subtitle announced, was the “classical art of the Near East.” The unity of Mesopotamian culture, he asserted, emerged from its foundation in the Sumero-Akkadian religion and worldview, which

persisted from the third to the first millennium BCE. Sumerian and Akkadian art, and its heirs the art of the Babylonians and Assyrians, formed “the central classical stem of ancient Near Eastern art, in comparison with which all the other arts, such as that of the Elamites, Hittites or Phoenicians, were of only peripheral importance” (Moortgat 1969: ix).

Employing the overarching rubric *ancient Near East* to describe and analyze its material remains offers advantages and disadvantages. It encourages us to treat this region as a unit from prehistory through historic times, although the *longue durée* perspective perhaps applies more convincingly to some areas than to others. For prehistoric times, for example, other geographical configurations may replace the unit embraced by “Sumero-Akkadian culture and its network of interactions.” In the revised Propyläen Kunstgeschichte series published in the mid-1970s, Near Eastern antiquity was divided between two volumes. *Frühe Stufen der Kunst* addressed “the beginnings of art” across the eastern Mediterranean and Near East from the Aegean to the Indus Valley, including Egypt and “Africa”; a separate section treated the beginnings of art in Europe, from Paleolithic times to the Iron Age (Mellink and Filip 1974). *Der Alte Orient* covered historical periods, dominated by developments in Sumer and Akkad, Babylon and Assur, but also including chapters on the art of Iran, the Hittites, Syria, Cyprus, and Minoan and Mycenaean art (Orthmann 1975). A narrow focus on a geographical definition of the region also discourages attention to the broader impact of material culture beyond its ill-defined and fluctuating borders. Objects found too far outside the ancient Near East—however indisputably authentic and of Near Eastern origin—are often effectively ceded to the scholars who operate in that other cultural sphere. As a result, specialists in ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology seldom address finds recovered from Greek sanctuaries or Etruscan tombs, for example, which they consider outside their jurisdiction.

Thus, we might reasonably ask whether “the ancient Near East” in fact persists as a meaningful unit for research and publication in academic and museum arenas, or represents instead an arcane and largely fossilized term reflecting the field’s nineteenth-century origins (and thus uninformative to those outside a narrow circle). In practice, a regional or nationally circumscribed focus often prevails with respect to fieldwork, academic training, museum collections research, and scholarly publication. Foreign schools and institutes established after World War I and World War II founded country- or area-specific journals covering all periods of antiquity (and sometimes also later sites and monuments): *Syria*, *Iraq*, *Iran*, *Baghdader Mitteilungen*, *Istanbuler Mitteilungen*, and *Damaszener Mitteilungen*, among others. University faculty and museum curators ordinarily specialize in Mesopotamia, the Levant, Iran, or Anatolia. Recently published handbooks organized by geographical region—Anatolia,

the Levant, and Iran—seem to reflect this practice (Steadman and McMahon 2011; Potts 2013; Steiner and Killebrew 2014). Meanwhile, alternative collectivities have emerged, such as “cuneiform culture” (Radner and Robson 2011). Well-documented geographical and cultural subdivisions—Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia, for example—likewise furnish historical terms that define a valid research domain. The articles that have appeared thus far in the Oxford Bibliographies Online Art History module pursue this direction (Seymour 2014; Collins 2016), as do recent publications intended for a wider readership (Leick 2007; Crawford 2013). New periodicals may opt to define their readership by region or culture province, perhaps simultaneously addressing priorities in current practices: for example, the *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* (2013–). Others, like the *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* (2009–), emphasize instead the interwoven (“global”) canvas and overlapping concerns of much contemporary scholarship devoted to the ancient world.

Ancient Near East is thus arguably more an outdated, if useful, convention than a dynamic concept productively governing the ways in which scholars now define their areas of expertise. Yet the term’s continued vitality as an operative rubric, describing a meaningful, broadly understood, and intertwined research domain, is also reflected in the titles of recently founded publications and professional organizations. Examples include the monograph series *Culture and History of the Ancient Near East* (2000–), the *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* (2002–), and the *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* (2014–). The International Congresses on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICAANE), established in 1998 by several European universities, sponsor a biennial gathering and publish the proceedings.

Periodization and Chronology of the “Ancient” Near East

When does the “ancient” Near East begin and conclude? Histories conventionally commence with the earliest written records in Mesopotamia and Iran dating to the late fourth millennium BCE, acknowledging a lengthy prehistoric occupation that demonstrates cultural continuity with historical times. The periodization introduced by histories of dynasties, kingdoms, and empires, beginning in the early third millennium, also serves histories of art and architecture, many of whose key monuments and contexts derive from political and religious centers under royal or imperial patronage. Beyond Mesopotamia, the archaeologically defined sequence of Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze, and Iron Ages furnishes a common framework.

At the other end of the chronological spectrum, the “ancient” Near East may conclude anywhere between the mid-sixth century BCE and the mid-seventh century CE. Nineteenth-century authors emphatically terminated ancient Near Eastern art with the passing of the torch to Greece, a periodization echoed in some twentieth-century surveys: “Egypt and Mesopotamia were the focal points of civilization from about 3000 until 500 B.C., when Greece took the lead” (Frankfort ([1954] 1996: 11). The conquests of Alexander the Great in the 330s BCE, ushering in an era of Hellenization from Egypt to Central Asia, are often chosen to signal this divide. Alternatively, the “ancient Near East” may close with the formation of the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550–330 BCE) or quite specifically with Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. A prolonged duration for Near Eastern antiquity emphasizes continuity of tradition in building plan, construction methods, or subject matter across dramatic changes in political organization and centralized rule. Barthel Hrouda’s (1971) handbook on the archaeology of the Near East included Seleucid and Parthian monuments exhibiting long-established indigenous traditions in religious or palatial architecture. Under certain circumstances, especially in the case of Iran, “antiquity” continues through the Sasanian era to the beginning of Islam and thus equates with “pre-Islamic” (Porada 1965; Collon 1995; Potts 2013).

Absolute chronologies furnished in many surveys, specialized publications, and online collections databases generally follow the “middle chronology,” which dates the reign of the Old Babylonian king Hammurabi from 1792 to 1750 BCE. Alternative “high” and “low” chronologies differ in how they calculate these dates (“high” = 1848–1806 BCE/ “low” = 1728–1686 BCE). This high-middle-low scheme of chronological reckoning ultimately derives from ancient observations of synodic phases of the planet Venus repeated in cycles of fifty-six or sixty-four years that are mentioned on tablets dating many centuries after Hammurabi’s reign. Many of the observations, however, are questionable and must be excluded from calculations of absolute dates. In recent decades, Mesopotamian chronology of the second millennium BCE has been extensively investigated and debated among scholars working with different kinds of data, including evidence from king lists, eponym lists, ceramic typologies, astronomical observations, radiocarbon dates, and dendrochronology (Gasche et al. 1998; Armstrong and Gasche 2014). While most scholars find it convenient to continue using the “middle chronology,” the validity of these dates remains highly uncertain. This unresolved issue has profound consequences for dating and interpreting the history of Mesopotamia and its neighbors before ca. 1000 BCE, and especially before ca. 1400 BCE.

Modern Frameworks for an “Ancient Near Eastern Art”

The rediscovery of ancient civilizations in the Tigris and Euphrates Valley is generally told as a story of archaeological exploration, beginning with early nineteenth-century European travelers and diplomats in the eastern regions of the Ottoman Empire (Chevalier 2012). Narrated as a chronicle of archaeological and Assyriological discoveries, it emphasizes the investigation of key Assyrian sites in northern Mesopotamia beginning in the 1830s, then in the south: Babylonia, Sumer, and Akkad. Retold more specifically within the context of this volume, our account would emphasize the critical role that museums in western Europe, and later in North America, played in developing a trajectory we could label as *art history*. Crucial to this process was the role of scholars—often museum professionals—initially trained in Greek art, who embraced within their purview the objects recovered from Mesopotamia that were relocated to national museums in Paris, London, and later Berlin (Porada 1995: 2698–701). There they were juxtaposed with sculptures from Greece and Egypt (in the British Museum) or with sculptures from the ancient Mediterranean along with western European sculptures from Renaissance through modern times (in the Louvre Museum) (Bohrer 2003: 74–84, 105–31). The immediate and practical concerns—where and how to display Assyrian sculptures in universal museums where classical statuary reigned supreme—gave the issue both prominence and urgency. By contrast, seals and other miscellaneous small objects that had previously reached Europe could be accommodated to similar types of objects in antiquarian studies or catalogues of public or private collections (Eppihimer 2015). Moreover, those earlier finds scarcely rivaled, either in scale or dramatic impact, the imposing remains of biblical civilizations uncovered in large quantities beginning around mid-century.

The arrival of Near Eastern antiquities in European museums precipitated sharp disagreement over their aesthetic quality—and thus also their art historical significance—explicitly *by comparison with Greek sculpture*. Greek art provided a paradigm both for the ideal subject matter (the human figure) and developmental sequence (the growth and triumph of naturalism). Austen Henry Layard, excavator of Nimrud and Nineveh, championed his finds, but Richard Westmacott, professor of sculpture at the Royal Academy London from 1827, decisively rejected the value of the “Nineveh Marbles” on these grounds. They might ultimately have value for the content of their inscriptions, he acknowledged, but as art they were “very bad” (Bohrer 2003: 124). Later in the century, explorations in southern Mesopotamia yielded

freestanding and relief sculptures from the earlier Sumerian and Akkadian cultures, most prominently the finds from French excavations at Tello (ancient Girsu). Many of these artifacts were praised for their formal sophistication and technical skill. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century publications increasingly labeled them not merely as antiquities, but as *art* (Heuzey 1891–1915; Andrae 1925). By the late nineteenth century, the finds from Mesopotamia and neighboring regions—Egypt, Phoenicia, Phrygia, and Lycia, among others—appeared in a ten-volume history of art in antiquity written by Georges Perrot and Charles Chipiez (1882–1914). These authors traced the developments in sculpture, architecture, painting, and minor arts (“arts industriels”) that preceded, and paved the way for, the achievements of ancient Greece. These “arts imparfaits,” as Perrot and Chipiez described them, were catalogued according to “national” or ethnically defined regions, but collectively viewed as precursors to the “perfect” art of ancient Greece. To a significant degree, the sculpture, paintings, and architecture of the ancient Near East emerged as *art* through their service as precursors of Greek art.

By contrast, a later chapter in the aesthetic debate profoundly revised earlier judgments. In this instance, Near Eastern antiquities emerged not as “imperfect” precursors to Greek art, but as visually powerful and accomplished works by comparison with the arts of any era. As in the nineteenth century, sculpture played a paramount role. Contemporary artists and sculptors, particularly those involved in the modernist direct carving movement of the first half of the twentieth century, enthusiastically embraced Assyrian stone sculptures along with examples from other cultural spheres, such as Egypt and India. These large-scale specimens—many housed in the British Museum and thus readily available for close observation—presented themselves as models and sources of inspiration for sculptors such as Jacob Epstein, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Henry Moore, and Barbara Hepworth (Arrowsmith 2011). Jean Evans (2012: 63–65) has reminded us of Frankfort’s interest in modern art and acquaintance with some of these sculptors.

Incorporating Near Eastern works in universal art history surveys further ensconced them both as precursors to Greek art and as “art.” With their teleological underpinnings, moreover, these surveys tended either to flatten distinctions among ancient cultures (collectively “pre-Greek”) or to forge stereotypes drawn from a handful of works, mostly sculptures, housed in a few western European museums. Thus, these surveys also helped establish a “canon,” a select group of “masterpieces” explicitly linked with much broader trends in the history of art, globally conceived. The first edition of Helen Gardner’s *Art through the Ages: An Introduction to its History and Significance*, published in 1926, included a chapter on “Babylonian, Assyrian,

Chaldaeian, and Persian Periods,” emphasizing Sumerian, Akkadian, and Assyrian sculptures housed in the British Museum and the Louvre. Subsequent editions of this standard English-language textbook have gradually incorporated a few additional, more recently excavated objects. Even finds from Neolithic sites, such as modeled skulls from Jericho, wall paintings or figurines from Çatalhöyük, or carved pillars from Göbekli Tepe could be heralded and framed as the “earliest” examples of genres considered ancestral to familiar Western “fine arts” categories: sculpture, painting, and portraiture (Kleiner 2014: 24–26).

A broadly similar selection of objects often appears in handbooks, histories, or exhibitions devoted to “ancient Near Eastern art”: a consensus largely driven by permanent museum displays, catalogues, and guidebooks that isolate or highlight individual works and circulate images for reproduction in surveys and other publications. Perhaps also at work is the idea, inherited from the nineteenth century, that we should find familiar notions about monuments and representation in these civilizations so closely tied to our Western foundations. While new critical perspectives in recent decades have unquestionably advanced understanding of the field and its theoretical sophistication, they have arguably addressed too small a group of monuments (chiefly Mesopotamian sculptures) housed in Western museums since the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, thus perpetuating rather than reconfiguring or abandoning traditional “fine arts” categories of sculpture, glyptic, and architecture. And yet pursuit of novel research directions in art history and other disciplines, toward topics such as gender and class, has simultaneously expanded the universe of objects comprising “ancient Near Eastern art” to include lead figurines, terracotta plaques, and jewelry. That these studies are published in books or journals whose titles bear the words *art history* or *ancient Near Eastern art* indicates the elasticity of the terms and the broad audience for these investigations, which clearly extends far beyond specialists. How the availability of online museum collections databases and other resources, such as ARTstor, might shape the contours of “ancient Near Eastern art” is not yet clear, but clearly holds considerable potential to do so (Feldman 2016).¹

Did the Ancient Near East in Fact Produce “Art”?

This volume’s title asserts that there is a widely recognized category of objects and monuments that scholars agree to approach from this perspective, and that it lends itself to methods of observation, documentation, and interpretation developed for the broader discipline of art history. It thus

posits a category of *art* that can be distinguished from the comprehensive universe of material remains recovered through archaeological investigation. Does it thereby mask or misrepresent significant differences with the modern West in notions about material and its transformation through human activity? Are we justified in privileging among the material remains of this region a category called *art*, a term that typically implies both a unique cultural status and a specially trained or gifted producer—an *artist* rather than a *craftsman*?

Critics argue that there is no term in ancient languages of the Near East that closely corresponds to “art” (or “fine arts”), and that venerating objects removed from their archaeological contexts is both intellectually and ethically indefensible. In their view, this perspective ignores, or at least downplays, the crucial significance of context and helps fuel an illicit traffic in antiquities that can be advertised as “works of art.” That global demand for antiquities for private and public collections drives looting, theft, and illegal export is undeniable. National scholarly traditions are also at play in this debate. In the European model of *Altorientalistik*, the study of “art historical” categories—sculpture, glyptic, or architecture, for example—is embraced by the field of Near Eastern archaeology and taught in conjunction with philology and history, while “ancient Near Eastern art” (or “art history”) is more commonly encountered as a subfield or departmental title in museums and universities in the United States. But if the modern “fine arts” framework is poorly suited to the circumstances of producing or appreciating images and other media that prevailed in ancient southwest Asia, how should we describe our material and reconstruct its aims and impact?

Drawing on Mesopotamia’s rich and lengthy textual record, specialists have recently sought to identify notions about the aesthetic sphere through detailed analysis of the vocabulary surrounding images, decoration, the built environment, and aesthetic experience more broadly, with significant results. Building on philological groundwork, they have examined Sumerian and Akkadian words and expressions concerned with aesthetic response, as revealed in a variety of written sources: royal inscriptions and correspondence, responses to oracular inquiries, temple hymns, and cult inventories, among others (Sasson 1990; Winter 2002, 2008). Texts describing the making of objects or the construction and furnishing of temples and palaces emphasize the skill and knowledge of successful practitioners. Terms employed in evaluating works give prominence to the intrinsic value of component materials (precious metals or stones) and praise consummate workmanship. A related direction in the “textual turn” analyzes the lexicon generally translated as “statue,” “image,” and “representation,” exploring the ontological status of these objects and their cultural meaning (Winter

1992; Bonatz 2002; Bahrani 2003, 2014; Nadali 2012, 2014; Bonatz and Heinz, this volume; Selz, this volume). Examined in conjunction with or in addition to written sources, archaeological evidence for acquiring, displaying, abducting, and destroying objects has been freshly probed, further elaborating the cultural meaning of the material world (Bahrani 2003; Evans 2012; May 2012), as have phenomenological approaches to reconstructing multisensory experience in the built environment (McMahon 2013, with bibliography). In association, these investigations document a specific and long-lived tradition in Mesopotamia that combines aesthetic and emotional responses, complex and original notions of representation, and an emphasis on the sacred arena for the display of valued objects.

Scholars of the ancient Near East are not alone in debating whether the term *art* appropriately labels any of the artifacts within their purview. Specialists dealing with ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome have recently offered thoughtful reappraisals, and this literature is instructive because the debates in fact share many specific concerns across divergent, if historically related, cultural spheres (Squire 2010; Baines 2015). Indeed, in this respect the once sharp boundaries separating these areas are becoming increasingly blurred. Classicists observe that neither Greek *techne* nor Latin *ars* neatly corresponds to *art* (or *fine arts*), and note the key role of material and workmanship in the ancient discourse on aesthetic experience. Some have altogether rejected the premise that there is a distinctively modern system of “the arts” that fundamentally differs from classical antiquity (Porter 2010). Egypt has yielded an extraordinary record of monuments and texts, yet relatively little critical commentary on aesthetic experience or neat counterpart to the term *art*. Fresh approaches to elaborating culturally specific concepts have adopted an expansive view, seeking to articulate “a range of aesthetically ordered activity” (Baines 2015). Moreover, scholars in all of these fields also face similar methodological challenges in documenting or interpreting aesthetic response in their respective domains, since few famous works have survived. In all cases, too, we study objects and buildings now typically incomplete, lacking precisely many of the materials or finishing treatments—paint, or inlays made of precious metals or stones, for example—that determined their value in antiquity. Recent investigations of polychromy and gilding on statuary, relief carvings, and architecture acknowledge and address this crucial fact (for the ancient Near Eastern sphere, see Nagel 2013, with bibliography). Even the alleged paradigm of famous artists and innovators long intertwined with early modern European notions of individuality and originality in artist and authorship has itself been challenged. Critics have called attention to the highly formulaic character of artist biographies, for example (Soussloff 1997; Ruffini 2011).

But even if we can begin to articulate an intellectually coherent and persistent tradition of aesthetic response in the ancient Near East, or at least in Mesopotamia, what about identifying individual agency in the creative process? Can we write histories of *art*—however that aesthetic dimension is culturally defined—without *artists*? Greeks are conventionally credited with initiating an environment hospitable to artistic creativity and individuality, signing their works and elevating the status of “craftsman” to “artist.” Scholars often draw a sharp contrast between Mesopotamia and Greece with respect to notions of originality and personal style. They tend to stress the conditions of anonymity and suppressed individuality that presumably governed artisans employed in Near Eastern palaces and temples, picturing a corps of bureaucrats bound by artistic formulas that were in turn dictated by political and religious conservatism and perpetuated by copy-oriented technologies such as grids and molds. These views have deeply and widely influenced perceptions about ancient Mesopotamia and are sometimes cited even today (e.g., Hurwit 2015: 17).

Yet specialists in Greek art have increasingly questioned the assumption that originality and individual artistic personality were highly venerated throughout classical antiquity. Recent research on Greek sculpture has challenged a fundamental aim of its modern scholarship: the search to identify the original features and individual style of master sculptors named in much later Roman accounts. Ancient sources celebrated the colossal size and rich materials of the chryselephantine Athena Parthenos, for example, and its sculptor Pheidias’s ability to express the gods’ majesty—not his personal style. And technical studies have demonstrated that casting large-scale bronze sculptures—the medium par excellence of the ancient Greek “masters”—required the mechanical reproduction of a preliminary form through the use of molds. “Emphasis on the Great Masters has diminished,” Brunilde S. Ridgway concludes, “in the realization that originality and distinctive manner are modern constructs, and that fame in antiquity could accrue for size and materials and not necessarily for stylistic appreciation” (Ridgway 2005: 70). This observation suggests more affinity with than distance from the celebration of valuable materials and fine workmanship that characterize aesthetic judgment in Mesopotamian texts. Nor is it even far removed from the Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim’s famous assertion that “the personality of the [Mesopotamian] artist ... remains completely beyond our reach” (Oppenheim 1964: 329).

At the same time, students of Mesopotamian literature have also reconsidered received notions about originality, creativity, and authorial voice. Names of individual authors are indeed known, and sometimes mentioned in a text, as with Kabti-ilani-Marduk, author of the *Epic of Erra*. The notion of genius,

writes Benjamin Foster (2011: 131–32), “privileges, perhaps unfairly, the highly original that breaks with or sets a new tradition, rather than creativity within a given set of patterns and expectations.” Historians have begun to explore topics once considered far outside the ancient Near Eastern purview: competitiveness as a distinctive cultural value or trait, for example, or the crucial role of an individual’s name and fame (Radner 2005, 2011; van Wees 2011). In the material realm, developments in pictorial narrative can now be investigated as artistic “experiments” inspired by contacts with specific monuments at a particular moment in time, rather than attributed vaguely to “outside influence” (Kaelin 1999).²

A chief argument for Greek “exceptionalism” in the celebration of individuality was—and remains—the signatures preserved on multiple categories of objects, including gems, architecture, wall paintings, vases, and sculptures (Hurwit 2015). Yet “signatures” that can plausibly be claimed to identify the name of the individual maker of an object in fact appear on only a small fraction of Greek antiquities, and, even then, cannot always be neatly correlated with individually bounded styles. Studies of signatures on works of art in other cultural spheres offer additional grounds for doubts (Seyller 1987; Clunas 1991: 60–71; Barbieri-Low 2007: 75, 78–79). Moreover, we know from administrative, legal, and other texts the names of many individuals who worked as trained artisans or craftsmen in the ancient Near East. Correspondence between Neo-Assyrian kings and their court scholars further elaborates the role of these “experts” (Gunter 2009: 159–64; Nadali 2012: 587; Neumann 2014: 136–50). A remarkable inscription of the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) records the divine consultation that preceded his refurbishing of Babylonian cult images housed in the Esharra Temple in Assur and the response: “they revealed to me the names of the artisans (fit) for completing the work.”³ And artisans other than court scholars could apparently achieve individual reputations. A letter to Sargon replied to a royal request: “As to Šimkaya, the axe-maker from Damascus whom [the king], my lord, wrote me about, I am herewith sending him to the king ... in the charge of my messenger” (Lanfranchi and Parpola 1990: no. 71).

After all, Mesopotamia, too, had its etiological “great men” tradition, if more frequently preserved in autobiographical than in biographical accounts. The Sumerian epic *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* credits Enmerkar, King of Uruk and Lord of Kullaba, with the spontaneous invention of writing to assist his messenger in reciting a lengthy oral account. Neo-Assyrian kings, especially Sennacherib, claimed not only expert knowledge of working with materials for building and decorating, but also the invention of new and complex technologies for casting bronze (Winter 2008). As in ancient Greece, the design and execution of large-scale buildings and monuments

“on the ground” required teams of artisans working to achieve a homogeneous style. And, undermining a literary tradition of heroic invention, Sumerian texts reveal that writing and measuring were considered divine gifts to humanity, practiced by anonymous humans, goddesses, kings, gods, and named humans—and scarcely ever by legendary heroes (Robson 2013: 56–60).

Comparative Approaches

Given the limited sources available for investigating many aspects of artistic production we wish to know more about, could we perhaps turn to other, better-documented cultural spheres for information or assistance? Under what circumstances might evidence of practices recorded or observed in historically related or unrelated societies be introduced as useful, or methodologically sound?

Neither the field of Assyriology nor the study of the ancient Near Eastern material record has traditionally encouraged comparative studies; on the contrary, both sought independence from other disciplines or scholarly agendas by prioritizing contextualization. Assyriology struggled to liberate itself from biblical studies, asserting that the ancient Near East merited investigation on its own terms. Comparisons with Greece almost inevitably cast the ancient Near East as a worthy but flawed predecessor, valued above all for its “gifts” to Greek (and therefore Western) civilization (Gunter 2009: 62–66). Thus, Henri Frankfort declared that “ancient Near Eastern art deserves to be studied for its own sake” rather than as a prelude to later Western developments ([1954] 1996: 12). Early studies of “the birth of civilization” in Egypt and Mesopotamia tended either to blur distinctions between these two “high civilizations” or to sharpen them, in order neatly to *contrast* Egypt with Mesopotamia (or “the ancient Near East”). The “environment and culture” perspective assumed dramatic differences between these two river valley civilizations in climate and natural resources, and consequently also between the cultures they fostered.⁴

Two approaches—comparisons and analogies—may usefully be distinguished here, as Norman Yoffee has recently advised. “Analogies require a structure in which two entities that share some similarities are assumed to share many others, that there are underlying principles of connection between the source-side and the side that is the subject of the investigation,” he writes. “Comparison, as opposed to analogy, entails the examination of two or more entities with the view of discovering resemblances and differences between them” (Yoffee 2005: 193–94). Specialists have occasionally turned

to ethnoarchaeology to shed light on the artifacts they uncover, and not least on the craft processes that produced them. This subfield studies modern material culture in “traditional” societies as analogies, or at least signposts, for interpreting the evidence of past societies. Similarly, experimental archaeology (or replication) works from detailed analysis of surviving specimens to reconstruct the processes, materials, and tools used to fashion and decorate them (Moorey 1994: 17–18; Schorsch, this volume).

Comparative studies drawing on ethnography have mostly focused on technologies and types of artifacts that appear in prehistoric contexts. Comparison of female figurines made from clay and stone in prehistoric societies is a well-known example. Formal similarities among these objects across a wide geographical expanse were long thought to indicate a like similarity in meaning, in this case as female divinities or even a single, primordial “Mother Goddess.” More recently, ethnographic research on figurines in Africa, Asia, and the Americas helped define functional classes—such as toys, initiation figures, and vehicles of magic—that could assist in analyzing figurines from archaeological contexts. Although not without its critics, this approach offered a new direction in the study of prehistoric anthropomorphic images (Lesure 2011: esp. 130–31; Green, this volume).

Comparisons with phenomena in geographically and historically unrelated spheres are unusual, but recent efforts demonstrate their promise. Irene Winter’s comparison of cult images in Mesopotamia and India is one example (Winter 2000). Complex and perceptive insights into subject, audience, and reception emerge from Dominik Bonatz’s analysis of Neo-Assyrian and Khmer narrative reliefs (Bonatz 2013). The advantages of such investigations extend beyond the potential to introduce perspectives on seemingly familiar monuments or traditions: itself a worthy goal. They also bring the ancient Near East and its remarkable material record into conversation with other cultural spheres. Such a dialogue represents a significant step outside the role that long defined the field, that of precursor to Greek art.

Conclusions

Ongoing debates over what constitutes the ancient Near East, and how to describe and analyze its material remains, furnish important opportunities to engage productively with crucial historical and methodological issues. A long tradition of scholarship positioned Mesopotamia and its neighbors in a developmental sequence that culminated in Greek artistic perfection. Newer research directions have constructively expanded the corpus conventionally comprising “ancient Near Eastern art,” encouraging still more fluid

boundaries between “archaeology” and “art history.” Engaging with other cultural spheres also holds rich potential to stimulate additional productive reflections on our enterprise.

NOTES

1. Amy Gansell and Ann Shafer have spearheaded a research project investigating the formation and development of the ancient Near Eastern “canon”; their forthcoming edited volume, *Testing the Canon of Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology*, will contribute significantly to this discussion.
2. See also the stimulating papers in Galán, Bryan, and Dorman 2014.
3. This translation follows Walker and Dick 2001: 26, with minor modifications. My thanks to Steven W. Cole for advice on translating this passage. For the text, see Leichty 2011: no. 48.
4. For a different approach, see Ataç 2006.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Recent surveys of ancient Near Eastern history include Liverani 2014 and Van De Mieroop 2015. While we lack a detailed historiography of ancient Near Eastern art history, recent studies of pioneer scholars helpfully move in this direction. For Henri Frankfort, see especially Wengrow 1999, Taylor 2011, and Evans 2012. The papers in Bleibtreu and Steymans 2014 describe the contributions of Edith Porada, best known for her magisterial work on cylinder seals but also for innovative studies of the art of pre-Islamic Iran (Porada 1965). Porada 1995 offers her own, personal account of the field’s history. For German scholarship, see especially Hrouda 1971: 307–10; Renger 1979; Bachmann 1996; Hrouda, Nagel, and Strommenger 2009; Bonatz 2011. Mariana Giovino’s (2007) thoughtful (and exceptional) investigation of the “Assyrian sacred tree” as a history of interpretation of the image demonstrates the potential for, and rewards of, this kind of analysis.

Gunter 1990 and Nadali 2014 address the debate over *art* and *artist* in the ancient Near Eastern context. For related debates concerning Egypt and Greco-Roman history, see Baines 2015 and the papers introduced by Squire 2010 (including Porter 2010).

Classical reception studies have generated a significant literature in recent decades, and studies of “Egyptomania” abound (Moser 2015). By comparison, the modern reception of the ancient Near East is as yet an incipient research field. Studies addressing Mesopotamia include Bohrer 2003; Holloway 2006; Bilsel 2012: 159–88; Evans 2012; and Chi and Azara 2015. For Iran, see Daftari 1988 and Grigor 2009. An important new direction investigates the role of archaeology and the reception of antiquities within the modern Middle East for their crucial role in establishing national museums and underwriting nationalist movements

(Bernhardsson 2005; Shaw 2007; Abdi 2008) and authoritarian regimes (Grigor 2009; Mousavi 2012: 155–92). Oscar W. Muscarella has extensively documented the manufacture of fakes and forged provenances, demonstrating the complex interaction of local and global practices and the outsize influence of private collectors and dealers, with profoundly destructive consequences (Muscarella 2013, 2014, both with bibliography).

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